

# Supporting the Supporters

## DLA's Workforce Development Plans

*Carol Scheina*



"We are absolutely critical to warfighters' being able to accomplish their mission. People in DLA take that very seriously. It's an important mission. And people are very proud of the work that they do and proud of the fact that we give great support to warfighters who are out there risking their lives every day."

Jeffrey R. Neal, DLA director of human resources

**O**perating in 48 states and 28 foreign countries, DLA's 23,000 civilian and military personnel reflect one of the Department of Defense's largest workforces. DLA's support to the military servicemembers comes in the form of an average of 54,000 requisitions and 8,200 contracts per day, and that's not all the agency does. In fact, in fiscal year 2007, DLA employees oversaw the provisioning of more than \$35 billion in goods and services to military services worldwide, including support to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"If America's forces can eat it, wear it, drive it, or burn it, chances are that DLA helps provide it," a DLA brochure declares. That's a hefty responsibility, indeed. The former director of the Defense Logistics Agency, Army Gen. Robert T. Dail, often reminded the DLA workforce that "our support should be worthy of their service."

But who's making sure the DLA employees supporting the warfighter are ... well, supported? What about their training and development? How does the agency retain the level of talented workers it needs to maintain its current and future operations?

After all, according to the fiscal year 2002 President's Management Agenda, "Approximately 71 percent of the government's current permanent employees will be eligible for either regular or early retirement by 2010, and then 40 percent of those employees are expected to retire. Without proper planning, the skill mix of the federal workforce will not reflect tomorrow's changing missions."

There needs to be a plan in place.

That's where Jeffrey R. Neal, director of human resources at DLA, comes in. He's the man behind the agency's overall human capital strategy, looking at how DLA fills and retains positions, structures positions in the agency, and develops future leaders. Part of DLA's future as an agency and its ability to continue operating at its current fast-paced tempo lies in the strength of its human capital planning.

### **A Strong HR Organization**

Part of DLA's human capital plan has been to prepare its human resources office to support the agency's acquisition workforce. That meant reorganizing the HR staff into an organization that could meet DLA's needs. So seven years ago, DLA created HR offices that oversaw strategic human capital issues that were important to the agency, such as the training of leaders, retention, and hiring corporate interns. Additionally, the agency created HR offices that support the major business initiatives of the agency, such as e-Procurement and inventory management and stock positioning. The HR offices supporting the business initiatives oversee the

training, organization, and job changes for specific areas within DLA.

"What we had done seven years ago is we had a fairly traditional HR organization in DLA—very traditional as a matter of fact," said Neal. But that wasn't quite enough. And so Neal came up with the idea of the HR Strategy Team.

"If you look at the typical HR organization and talk to them about things that need to be done, they know the things that need to be done," Neal explained. But most HR people don't have time to do the things they know need to be done, and they end up focusing on the tasks that are due tomorrow.

The HR Strategy Team was created specifically to look at the long-term assignments, namely those that last six months to years. In fact, five years were spent working on the DLA competency assessment process, which is similar to the competency assessment that was being conducted by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics at the same time. The HR Strategy Team needed the separation from the day-to-day distractions of the HR world in order to finalize the competency plan, making it into a tool that could be duplicated in future years. With a solid competency plan in place, the agency could track trends for specific career fields and appropriately plan recruiting, retention, and training strategies for future years.

### **Ask the Workforce**

Another aspect of planning for the future involves asking employees how they feel about the now. To answer that question, DLA has conducted three culture surveys over a period of six years, and a fourth culture survey was recently completed in spring 2009. More than 60 percent of the agency participated in the first culture survey, and response rates rose to 70 percent by the second survey.

The agency researched a number of industry culture survey tools before deciding to use the Denison™ Culture Model as the basis for its culture survey. According to the Denison Web site, the culture model focuses on mission, consistency, involvement, and adaptability, which can be broken down into 12 aspects of corporate culture. The model also involved a 360-degree feedback tool that evaluated how supervisors in the agency mirrored the agency's culture.

"We think the process is really worth the time and the money invested because it really does help us understand how the workforce views the culture at DLA. And how they view it is how it is. It doesn't matter how the senior executives and the generals and the admirals view the culture. What matters is how the people who do the work every day view the culture. If they view it negatively, then it's negative," Neal said. He added, "How the supervisors and managers and senior executives and generals and admirals view it is nice to know, but is not as important as how the rank-and-file



employees who actually do the work of the agency view it, because they're the ones who get it done."

### Leadership Development

The culture survey revealed that employees wanted more leadership development opportunities, resulting in the development of DLA's leadership program. The five-tier program, recognized by the Partnership for Public Service as one of the most effective in the federal government, provides leadership development for all employees ranging from those who want to be supervisors to senior leaders in the agency.

DLA created a training and development program for new supervisors. It didn't matter if an employee had been a supervisor elsewhere—all new supervisors at DLA went through the program. The two-year program involved classroom training, on-the-job training, peer coaching, and executive coaching. More than 1,000 new supervisors have gone through the program since it was created.

"We have the most turnover in supervisory jobs in first-level supervisory positions, so focusing on that level first allowed us to get a lot of people into the program over the last few years," said Neal.

The new supervisors program was so successful that other supervisors began asking for a program that fit their leadership capabilities. And so DLA created a retrofit program to provide some of the same training and development opportunities to all supervisors as well as training for other employees.

Tier I was developed for employees with a desire to become supervisors and gain leadership capabilities. It provides an overview of leadership training and development activities—such as a class, handbook and informal mentoring for non-supervisors and team leads. The new supervisors' program became Tier II. Some of the core pieces of Tier II were tai-

lored to employees who had been supervisors for three or four years but hadn't been given the opportunity to take new supervisors' training. Tier III targeted leaders with two to 10 years of experience, and the tier involves opportunities for participants to write and speak on leadership as well as leadership classroom courses. As leaders develop, they are given the opportunity to progress to more advanced leadership classes, such as those that are offered in Tier IV and Tier V. Tier IV is for supervisors with more than 10 years of experience. Like Tier III, Tier IV involves opportunities for participants to write and speak on leadership, but it also offers an advanced leadership course. Tier V is targeted toward those in the Senior Executive Service and for managers of managers. It involves a senior leader offsite as well as executive-level courses and activities that encourage coaching, mentoring, and speaking opportunities.

"We're still developing the program. Ten years from now, we should still be developing the program because it needs to adapt," Neal said. "As the agency changes, as the requirements that we have change, we'll keep modifying that program, which is what we do with our corporate intern program. We've been constantly adapting that program as we go because it needs to grow with the agency, and it needs to fit the mission."

### Bringing Talent Onboard

While the leadership development program honed and shaped DLA's leaders, the agency needed an infusion of new talent to replace those who would be retiring in years to come. That's where the agency's corporate intern program comes in.

"It's our primary intake method for our core business occupations—for our acquisition positions, for our supply positions, for our IT positions—the primary way we bring those folks on board is through our corporate intern program," Neal said.



Started seven years ago, the intern program receives a diverse pool of applicants seeking careers as contract specialists; product specialists; supply management specialists; environmental protection specialists; property disposal specialists; information technology specialists; accountants; human resource specialists; and other high-demand, need-to-fill jobs.

Subject matter experts and DLA HR staff members travel to college campuses

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to recruit recent college graduates for the program. Additionally, many former military members apply for the program, bringing extensive military experience and training to the job. It is, indeed, a diverse group, and interns come on board with a wide range of experiences they can apply to their careers at DLA.

Participants in the intern program experience two years of on-the-job assignments, cross-training, rotational assignments, and formal training. Interns are full-time, permanent workers, receiving all the benefits of serving as a government employee. They start at the GS-7 grade equivalent and graduate from the program at the GS-11 grade.

Of DLA’s 23,000 employees, the agency had 900 participants in the corporate intern program in summer 2008. In early 2009, the agency hired about 150 to 200 employees. Not only is DLA recruiting large numbers of interns, but they’re also retaining them—they’ve had a 90 percent retention rate of interns.

“If you have a training program like that and you keep 90 percent of the people, you’re doing great. [It’s] our biggest way of bringing people into the agency and in our core occupations,” said Neal. “The ways we keep them are we survey them as they’re coming in to find out why they came to work for us. If you find that people come for a particular reason and then it turns out that that reason isn’t true, then we’re probably going to lose them. So we do an entrance survey to find out why folks are coming to work at DLA.”

### **Why Folks Are Going to DLA**

In fact, DLA conducts a lot of surveys. The agency conducts entrance surveys not only for corporate interns, but for all its new employees. The agency wants to know what it’s doing well in regards to attracting employees. DLA also wants to know why people leave DLA, and what could have been

done to retain an employee. The entrance and exit surveys are conducted in addition to the culture survey.

DLA wants to know how DLA employees feel about the agency—their work, how they are treated, if they have the tools they need to succeed. As a result, DLA has been developing strong work/life programs. Many of DLA’s global facilities have fitness centers, and the agency encourages employees to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Several facilities also have onsite daycare child development centers, which are fully accredited to take care of children and are often cheaper than local childcare centers.

“We offer telework—we have over 5,000 positions that are approved for telework now—and people are teleworking a day or sometimes two days a week,” Neal said. “We offer compressed work schedules; we offer flexible work schedules.”

In addition to DLA’s work/life programs and human capital plans, the agency’s HR successes are also helped in part by the tremendous amount of pride DLA employees have in the work they do. DLA employees have been asked to provide unanticipated extra effort to support Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, but the overall support the agency has provided has continued without wavering.

“We were having to do a lot of work in DLA. We’re still doing a lot of work, and our sales volume has increased enormously in the last few years. But when you ask the DLA workforce to put out extra effort to support something like that, they always do,” Neal said. “When the war in Iraq started, you didn’t see people leaving DLA because the workload was increasing. We didn’t have any more trouble recruiting, and we didn’t have trouble keeping people. Our employees always, always support what we need to do for the warfighters—every time. It’s very rewarding when you go to a DLA facility and see people who are really working hard because they know that somebody in Iraq or somebody in Afghanistan is going to end up benefiting from the work that they’re doing.”

Neal added, “If you look at what DLA does, we provide food, we provide medical supplies, clothing, spare parts, all the fuel that’s used—basically, everything that’s not a repairable part out there comes from DLA. America’s armed forces can’t go to war without DLA. We are absolutely critical to warfighters’ being able to accomplish their mission. People in DLA take that very seriously. It’s an important mission. And people are very proud of the work that they do and proud of the fact that we give great support to warfighters who are out there risking their lives every day.”

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